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Book review: Rise and kill first

by Emil Archambault



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On 6 August 2018, an article by David Halbfinger and Ronen Bergman appeared in the *New York Times*, reporting on the death of a Syrian scientist working on a missile program (Halbfinger and Bergman, 2018). Syrian sources were quick to blame Israeli agents for the car bomb which killed the scientist, accusations which Israel was quick to dismiss. Yet, as Halbfinger and Bergman note, this car bomb followed a suspicious pattern: 'Israel did not claim responsibility. It never does. But the Mossad has a long history of assassinating scientists developing weaponry seen as a threat' (Halbfinger and Bergman, 2018).

This long-standing pattern of targeted assassinations is the focus of Ronen Bergman – a correspondent for the Israeli daily *Yedioth Ahronoth* and for *The New York Times*, author of the article quoted above – in his monumental book *Rise and kill first*. As Bergman notes, 'Israel has assassinated more people than any other country in the Western world' (Bergman, 2018, p. xxii). Accordingly, this book demonstrates the central – and constant – presence of targeted assassination in Israeli policy since the beginning of the twentieth century, before even the foundation of the state of Israel. To some measure, the result of a disadvantageous military situation, diplomatic isolation, the Holocaust trauma and path dependency, Bergman argues that targeted killing often became the default option for the resolution of diplomatic, political and military crises.

In this book, Bergman traces the use of targeted assassination by the Israeli Defence Forces and by intelligence agencies, noting broad shifts in doctrines, the means and restraints on the use of assassination, and strategic imperatives. The overall impression from Bergman's account is that Israeli counter-insurgency has largely been stuck on a path dependency of violent repression since the very beginnings of the state of Israel. 'Killing the driver', as former commando leader and Mossad director Meir Dagan put it (Bergman, 2018, p. xxi), has become the go-to solution for all kinds of political and military problems, often in place of other, less violent (or perhaps more effective) solutions.

The reasons for this preponderance of targeted assassination are multiple. The first identified by Bergman is the – not unwarranted – perception of an imminent threat of annihilation of Israel (Bergman, 2018, pp. 11, 49). As he explains, given Israel's acute perception of imminent menace from other regional powers – Egypt, Syria, Iran and Iraq – by overt means, or more recently by covert ones, Israel perceives itself justified in taking 'any and all measures, however extreme, to obtain security, and will relate to international law and norms in a marginal manner, if at all' (Bergman, 2018, p. 11). As such, Israel, according to Bergman, engages routinely in extralegal executions, which stand not only outside of international law – contravening fundamental tenets of sovereignty (and at times even targeting state officials of foreign countries) – but also of domestic law, as Israeli law does not allow for the death penalty (Bergman, 2018, p. 32).

Examples of such threats, which have led to extensive targeted assassination campaigns include, among others, the development of heavy armament by Israel's neighbours. Indeed, targeted assassination campaigns against foreign scientists bookend Bergman's study. Early in the book, he relates Israel's frenetic efforts to interrupt Egyptian missile development in 1962, resorting



to the kidnapping and assassination of German scientists working on the project in Egypt and in Europe. Its intimidation tactics and diplomatic pressure on West Germany went as far as to enlist the help of Otto Skorzeny, a former Waffen SS colonel (Bergman, 2018, p. 61). Bergman notes that a 1982 internal Mossad report determined that the use of violence had been absolutely necessary in stopping the project (Bergman, 2018, p. 85). The book closes with a discussion of the elimination of Iranian scientists working on the development of an atomic bomb. Bergman alleges that Meir Dagan, head of the Mossad in 2010, launched an all-out campaign of targeted assassination of scientists working on the Iranian project, in part as an effort to forestall Benjamin Netanyahu's plan for a military invasion of Iran (Bergman, 2018, pp. 622–627). In the end, Bergman argues, the beginning of secret talks between the United States and Iran – culminating in the Joint Comprehensive Plan of Action agreement – was due in large part to Iranian weakness due to Israeli pressure, including targeted assassination, and to American fear of Israel escalating military action (Bergman, 2018, p. 628).

Furthermore, Israel has often felt abandoned by other Western powers, leading it to believe in the need to resort to extreme measures on its own to ensure its protection. Two incidents in particular stand out in Bergman's narrative: the first is the disastrous intervention of West German police forces to resolve the kidnapping of Israeli athletes in Munich in 1972. After Israel was denied permission to lead the rescue intervention, culminating in the historically resonant deaths of Jews on German soil (Bergman, 2018, pp. 149–150), Prime Minister Golda Meir decided to expand targeted assassination to anywhere in the world, including in friendly European countries (Bergman, 2018, p. 152). The second incident is the discovery of an advanced Syrian nuclear reactor in 2007, and the United States' refusal to intervene to destroy it, leading to an Israeli air attack and a wave of Mossad targeted killings against Syrian officials (Bergman, 2018, pp. 589–595). Arguably, the United States' refusal to act comforted Israel's perception of being the sole actor responsible for its own security, notably through an expanded targeted killing campaign.

The final reason for Israel's preference for targeted killing, according to Bergman, is the presence of a tradition preceding the foundation of the State of Israel. Indeed, as he notes, nearly all Israeli prime ministers were intimately involved in targeted assassination or terrorist attacks prior to assuming office. David Ben-Gurion, Yitzhak Shamir and Menachem Begin had engaged in terrorist attacks against British and Arab leaders prior to 1948 (Bergman, 2018, pp. 17, 19). Shamir, Ehud Barak and Ariel Sharon commanded targeted assassination units (Bergman, 2018, pp. 42–46, 70, 141), and Benjamin Netanyahu served in Sayeret Matkal, the IDF's commando unit which engaged regularly in targeted killings. Several Mossad directors additionally rose through the ranks from backgrounds in targeted assassination units: the most prominent of these examples is undoubtedly Meir Dagan, who began his career in 1969 as the commander of a targeted assassination unit in Gaza (under the command of Ariel Sharon), before commanding a similar unit in South Lebanon in 1979, and later becoming the prime minister's counterterrorism adviser and finally Mossad chief from 2002 to 2010. In Bergman's account, Dagan represents one of the central influences in the development of the Israeli counter-insurgency doctrine, the core of which consists of the use of decapitation killings, along with the systematic degradation of enemy networks (Bergman, 2018, p. 127). According to Bergman, the heavy presence of former IDF commanders, as well as operatives experienced in targeted killing – combined with the perception of the success of these former operations – creates self-perpetuating pressure in favour of targeted assassination.

Bergman's history of targeted assassination contains a huge trove of details, drawing on publicly available sources as well as on numerous interviews – over 400 were conducted, most of which are anonymous. Accordingly, Bergman uses a very expansive definition of targeted assassination. *Rise and kill first* is really about Israeli counter-insurgency as a whole, a campaign which – arguably



– has been going on since the state's foundation. Operations discussed include pinpoint discrete operations in Europe or in the Middle East, with munitions such as guns (Bergman, 2018, p. 181), car bombs (Bergman, 2018, p. 176), even poisoned toothpaste (Bergman, 2018, p. 212). The book also includes multiple examples of mail bombs (Bergman, 2018, p. 68), which are notoriously ineffective. Other operations include large-scale commando operations undertaken by IDF units – most often Sayeret Matkal or Flotilla 13 – outside of active warzones; operation "Spring of Youth", a raid in Beirut in 1973 to eliminate several commanders of the Fatah, is one such example. Later, Bergman discusses the transition to airborne strikes in the Occupied Territories and in Lebanon, either by armed drones or by attack helicopters (with drones often accomplishing surveillance). A final category of operations discussed consists in commando units actively combating terrorism with military force. These missions – notably those headed by Dagan in Gaza in 1969 and in South Lebanon in 1979 – included targeted killings, but also counterterrorist missions more broadly, as well as intelligence gathering (Bergman, 2018, pp. 133–135). Often, as Bergman relates, these operations devolved into outright war crimes, with torture, the execution of prisoners and the wilful killing of civilians being part of normal operations. In Bergman's account, the 'killing' element of 'targeted killing' is the most common, with operations being 'targeted' to quite variable degrees: the instruction 'kill them all', tellingly, recurs at several points (Bergman, 2018, pp. 234, 497; see also pp. 242, 272–275, 520–525).

One of the more recent debates within studies of targeted killing concerns the role of drones in enabling, encouraging and furthering the use of targeted assassination. In this respect, Bergman's book provides crucial insight. In much the same way as Eyal Weizman had described Israel and its Occupied Territories as a 'laboratory' for occupation and population control (Weizman, 2017, p. 241), Bergman notes that Israel's system of targeted killing directly inspired its American equivalent, which appeared after 2001 (Bergman, 2018, p. 515). The United States, following the September 11, 2001 attacks, went from considering Israeli targeted killing as 'illegitimate', if not an outright war crime, to seeking to replicate its killing infrastructure (Bergman, 2018, p. 512).

Bergman provides a direct account of the first drone-led air strike in Lebanon in 1992 (Bergman, 2018, pp. 383–396), targeting Hussein Abbas Al-Mussawi, the Secretary General of the Hezbollah. This strike highlights a number of problematic slippages in the decision-making often surrounding drone strikes. First, as Bergman makes clear, deliberation on this strike was extremely rapid and flawed. The possibility of killing Mussawi was presented as a once-in-a-lifetime opportunity, although no evidence supporting this assessment is present (Bergman, 2018, p. 393). Prior debates on whether Mussawi was a legitimate target (Bergman, 2018, p. 391) were forgotten once the concrete possibility of killing him was made manifest. The Prime Minister, Yitzhak Shamir, was briefed for at most one minute before authorising the strike (Bergman, 2018, p. 395). Second, the lack of clear intelligence was forgotten in the pursuit of the target: several civilians, including Mussawi's wife and son, were killed along with him, without a conscious decision having been made on the acceptability of civilian casualties (Bergman, 2018, p. 396). In other words, the attractiveness of an air strike obliterated careful decision-making. Finally, the rapid nature of the operation made any kind of post-strike planning, which would have inscribed its effects in a wider strategic framework, impossible (Bergman, 2018, p. 399); indeed, IDF Chief of Staff, Ehud Barak, and Minister of Defence, Moshe Arens, later carefully admitted that killing Mussawi was a strategic error (Bergman, 2018, p. 408). This is symptomatic of many drone strikes, both Israeli and American: decision-making is rushed, alternatives – including, most crucially, the alternative to *not* fire – are often discounted, and the killing is achieved with minimal attention to strategic effects (Carvin, 2012, p. 538).

Further implications can be drawn out from the subsequent implementation of targeted killing through drones by Israel. First, Bergman makes clear that the development of drones did not create



the policy of targeted killing, nor did the appearance of drones radically change the nature of Israeli counter-insurgency. Targeted killing, as he demonstrates, has been perceived as an alternate means to war throughout the history of the State of Israel. Second, the policy of targeted killing – particularly in its systematic incarnation from the 1990s onwards – relied on the systematic collection of intelligence: Unit 8200, the military signals intelligence unit, was notably put to great use, being described as a ‘production line for targeted killing’ (Bergman, 2018, p. 502). Drones, as such, allowed for the dramatic expansion of the intelligence-gathering capabilities of Israeli intelligence agencies, allowing the country to expand its targeted killings. As Bergman notes, Israel conducted over 1,000 targeted killing operations during the Second Intifada (and over 800 since then), demonstrating the rapid acceleration of operations due to increased intelligence gathering and the streamlining of decision-making (Bergman, 2018, p. 480). Third, drones participate in warfighting and targeted killing in a variety of roles, not necessarily as hunter-killers (as Grégoire Chamayou (2013), for instance, presents them, or as ‘pure drone warfare’ according to Hugh Gusterson (2017)). Rather, they are embedded in a whole network of intelligence gathering, surveillance and execution, as targeters (Bergman, 2018, p. 385), signal relays (Bergman, 2018, p. 466) or surveillance for other aircraft (Bergman, 2018, p. 396).

Thus, while drones do not, in themselves, cause targeted killing to become systematic policy, their use enables the dramatic expansion of killing capabilities. In response to the introduction of drones, Israeli forces expanded their rules of engagement with the elaboration of a legal framework (Bergman, 2018, pp. 509–510), implemented a permanent war room to streamline operations (Bergman, 2018, p. 480), and found ways to diminish political oversight on operations (Bergman, 2018, p. 429).

Ultimately, Bergman argues, Israel found itself caught in a spiral where the possibility of targeted killing superseded the strategic imperatives which ought to guide it: ‘[IDF Northern Command officers] felt that the target, Haldoun Daidar, was minor and insignificant, and that there was no significant strategic gain to be had from killing him. But the Israelis had gathered enough actionable intelligence on him, and the system had proved itself so many times before, that in the minds of some, there was also no reason *not* to kill him’ (Bergman, 2018, p. 466). Bergman closes the book by noting the late conversions of Meir Dagan and Ariel Sharon – two of the strongest proponents of targeted killing – to political solutions to the threats to Israel, highlighting the irony of Israel’s most ruthless generals dispelling ‘the illusion [...] that covert operations could be a strategic and not just a tactical tool – that they could be used in place of real diplomacy to end the geographic, ethnic, religious, and national disputes in which Israel is mired’ (Bergman, 2018, p. 629). Bergman’s *Rise and kill first* is the story of a self-perpetuating tactic, which crowded out every other means of conflict resolution, leading to ‘impressive tactical success [and] disastrous strategic failure’ (Bergman, 2018, p. 610).

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